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Cross Linguistic Influences in L2 Learning: the case of Arabic Negation System

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Introduction

Learning the system of negation in modern standard Arabic (MSA), like many others of its aspects, poses problems for learners of Arabic as a second language (L2). This is probably due to its complexity in comparison to other languages as it comprises the sub-systems of gender, number, and tense which all have their own detailed features.

The main objectives of the current study are (1) to investigate and analyse the acquisition of negation in the writing of learners of MSA whose L1 is either English, or Lebanese Arabic (dialect) in a classroom environment, (2) to identify the patterns of errors in negation in MSA and compare the errors made by the subjects (Ss) of the two language backgrounds to see if there are similarities in the errors made regardless of L1 or if errors can be attributed to their L1, and (3) to monitor the Ss' IL in respect of negation and determine what role, if any, L1 plays in its acquisition.

The nature of their interlanguage grammar in relation to negation in MSA, i.e. their level of attainment or mastery of its systems as indicated, here, by their errors (or their absence) in its application in writing will be looked into to determine the effect L1 has on their acquisition. The choice of the two groups' L1 (English and Lebanese Arabic) was made with this in mind. English and the Lebanese Arabic, belong to typologically two different families of languages, namely Germanic and Semitic, respectively.

1 Lebanese Arabic here refers to the spoken variety or varieties of subjects from a Lebanese background. No dialect distinction will be made within this group.
The present study draws on the assumption that L1 and L2 are acquired in the same way (L1=L2) and that L2 learners’ errors are similar to those made by L1 learners. This assumption is substantiated by the present study and by many other studies (cf., Kasem, 2000, Wode, 1978, and 1981, Ellis, 1994, and Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991).

One of the main objectives of theories of second-language (L2) acquisition is to account for the manner and order in which a second language is acquired and develop an explanation that is applicable across language specific boundaries regardless of the learner’s first language (L1). Most current theories of second-language acquisition assume that the learner’s native language plays a role in the acquisition; however, what role the native language plays is something less certain and controversial. Some linguists are of the view that certain features of L1 are initially transferred to the interlanguage grammar, but given the appropriate input will be ultimately adjusted to the correct L2 setting (e.g., White’s “transfer hypothesis” of 1987). On the other hand, others believe L1 serves as a “surrogate” Universal Grammar (UG) for the learner and only those aspects of UG that are manifested in the native language will be acquired by the learner (e.g., Bley-Vroman’s “fundamental difference hypothesis” of the 1989).

Gass (1996) traces four phases of research in SLA in relation to L1 influence over the past 40-50 years:

1. L1 influence was seen to be of primary importance (e.g., Lado, 1957).
2. That influence was minimised (e.g., Dulay and Burt, 1974c).
3. “Research turned to qualitative aspects of NL influence.”
4. Current research in which L1 influence “is driven by current theoretical issues of Language and language acquisition” (p. 317)

Gass adds, “from the late 1970s to the present day, researchers ... have sought to understand the constraints that govern which aspects of an NL are transferred and the underlying principles that determine the transferability of NL information” (pp. 317-18).

Transferability and learner’s perception of markedness and L1-L2 distance

Learner’s perception of L1-L2 distance and markedness, for example, are two such “underlying principles” that were found to affect the learner’s decision-making.
processes as to which linguistic elements are transferable and which are not. On the basis of Kellerman's (1979, 1983) and Du? kova's (1984) research findings and their interpretation, one would expect, for this study, the subject group whose L1 is Lebanese Arabic to find more linguistic elements transferable to MSA. That is to say, L1 influence, in the form of interference or transfer, is likely to play a bigger role for them.

Kassem and Mansouri (1998) found that their Experimental Group, which was taught a number of structures in an “integrated approach”, one that used both a spoken variety of Arabic, namely Jordanian Arabic, and MSA “performed equally as well and in many cases significantly better than their Control Group taught by the traditional Standard approach” (p. 47). The claim made, however, is, “If a student has a foundation in MSA, then a transition into any of the Arabic dialects is relatively easy” (Mansoor 1960: 95, Al-Hamad 1983: 95). Positive transfer is, thus, presumed to go from MSA to spoken dialects. But is this transfer likely to work in the opposite direction? This question will be addressed later in this study.

In their review of research on the effect of L1 on SLA, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) concluded, “L1-L2 differences do not necessarily mean difficulty in SLA. On the contrary, it is similarities between native and target language, which tend to cause many problems. When L1 transfer occurs, it generally does so in harmony with development processes, modifying learners’ encounters with IL sequences rather than altering them.” (p. 106)

However, based on the literature reviews of Ellis, 1985 and 1990, and Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991, Richie & Bhatia (1996) concluded that “careful empirical work indicates that classroom instruction has some effect on the rate of acquisition but little or none on the sequencing or result of acquisition” (p. 20). Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) summarised Wode’s (1981) findings on the acquisition of English negation across different acquisitional types, namely child language development, foreign language learning, naturalistic second language learning and relearning, pidginization and creolization, as follows:

“The similarities found in the developmental structures and developmental sequences ... reflected universal processing abilities and (innate) language-learning

2 Native language or L1
Conclusion

The overall quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis of the data collected for this study supports its three main objectives: (1) to investigate and analyse the acquisition of negation in the writing of learners of MSA whose L1 is either English, or Lebanese Arabic in a classroom environment, (2) to identify the patterns of errors in negation in MSA and compare the errors made by the subjects (SSs) of the two language backgrounds to see if there are similarities in the errors made regardless of L1 or if errors can be attributed to their L1, and (3) to monitor the SSs’ IL in respect of negation and determine what role L1 plays in its acquisition.

Much of the second-language acquisition research on adult learners’ errors focused on determining the extent to which L2 acquisition was the result of cross-linguistic influences (L1 transfer) or of creative construction (the construction of unique rules similar to those that children form in the course of acquiring their mother tongue). The presence of errors that mirrored L1 structures was taken as evidence of cross-linguistic influences, whereas the presence of errors similar to those observed in L1 acquisition was indicative of creative construction (cf., DULay and Burt, 1973, 1974a, and 1974b).

According to scores obtained by each group in the written task, and data obtained from qualitative analysis of responses to the task given to SSs the findings of this study support the predictions concerning the development of learner’s interlanguage – errors of a developmental type occur when the learner attempts to build up hypothesis about the target language based on limited experience.

Second language acquisition of the 1980s and 1990s strongly indicated that a substantial number of adult learners’ errors are not attributable to L1 interference. For many researchers, such errors are nothing more or less indicators of developmental process found in both first- and second-language acquisition, and therefore such errors are often termed developmental errors (see Kasem, 2000; DULay and Burt, 1973; Meisel et al., 1981; McLaughlin, 1987; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; and Ellis, 1994). In fact, many researchers have argued that cross-linguistic influences, or L1 transfer, accounts for between 5% and 25% of grammatical errors. The important point to be made here is the fact that many errors are clearly not the result of L1 transfer.

It was expected for this study, that the subjects whose L1 was Lebanese Arabic to find more linguistic elements transferable to MSA. That is to say, L1 influence in the form of interference or transfer is likely to play a bigger role for them. Positive transfer was presumed to go from Lebanese Arabic to MSA particularly in the use of / "y'lal/ and "l/ / maa/ because of the similarities between MSA and Lebanese Arabic in this respect. However, data analysis revealed that students of Lebanese background were actually moving away from using the two negation particles in question. This finding, however, gives support to Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) claim that L1-L2 differences do not necessarily mean difficulty in SLA. On the contrary, it is similarities between native and target language which tend to cause many problems” (p.106).
Reference


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